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It is possible to discern definite stages of development in the mind and art of Emily Dickinson through a chronological examination of her poems and letters. Three major concerns of her poetry are God, death, and privation; the shifting perspectives of her approach to each of these themes show the maturation of her intellect as well as her poetic craft. Her early poems and letters are evidence of a strong desire for religious conversion, and show a sense of separation from both God and man. Her work during her middle years employs skepticism as a poetic tool in shaping that sense of separation into a personal and artistic asset. The later poems and letters reveal an increased self-reliance that is the fruit of her constant sense of isolation. A study of Dickinson's developing perspective on her individual and aesthetic distance leads to a further appreciation for her considerable intellect, as well as an increased understanding of her poetry.

SEPARATION, SKEPTICISM, AND THE SELF:

THE DEVELOPING MIND AND ART OF

EMILY DICKINSON

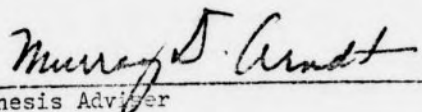
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson's poetic development was closely linked to the development of her religious thought. Any analysis of her poetry must necessarily include extensive commentary on the nature of her religious experiences; conversely, a discussion of her religion must depend largely on her poetry for insights and revelations. The processes evolved interdependently into a tension that produced the right interior climate for the creation of her curiously sacred art. It could be said that poetry served as Emily Dickinson's religion; however, it seems nearer to the truth, and to her own artistic intentions, to say that both poetry and religion served as means to a still larger end -- the knowledge and eventual transcendence of the self. Emily Dickinson lived and worked by shaping her relatively narrow experience to the demands of her exacting intellect and her acute consciousness; her poetic vision was telescopic, sharpening the focus of the eye and the mind from the general to the particular. Poetry and religion, the two shaping forces of her life, were lenses through which she sought to clarify undefined existence into real significance. A study of her work reveals that this final significance rested within the self, and that transcendence of the self was achieved through the interaction of spiritual, artistic, and intellectual effort.

Certainly it is true that an early and vital crisis in Dickinson's life was religious in nature. As a student at the Mount Holyoke Semin-

ary, she was unable to participate in a school-wide revival; she keenly felt the lack of this experience, and, perhaps even more importantly, she was made aware at an early age of a sense of separation from both God and man. In this study, it will be necessary to carefully consider Dickinson's Puritan heritage and its inevitable effect on both her religious awareness and her poetic craft. By her own admission, she did "see New Englandly," and the New England she knew in the nineteenth century was in many ways firmly grounded in its seventeenth century past. Certainly changes had occurred in theological dogma -- one thinks immediately of the influence of Transcendentalism -- but the basic dictates of Calvinism remained intact. Hyatt Waggoner points out that this was particularly true of conservative Amherst:

. . . Congregationalism as Amherst knew it was trinitarian, Bible-centered, dogmatically articulate, and concerned chiefly with individual salvation in a life after death. To be religious in this village society was to experience a conviction of salvation, to become an active member of the church, and to profess publicly faith in its dogma.¹

This was clearly not the sort of atmosphere in which a questioning attitude toward religion would be welcomed; yet the young Emily Dickinson did approach spiritual matters doubtfully, in an attempt to reach honest answers that were based on her own experience. A self-descriptive passage in an early letter to her friend Abiah Root reads as follows:

I am not unconcerned Dear A. upon the all important subject, to which you have so frequently & so affectionately called my attention in your letters. But I feel that I have not yet made my peace with God. I am still a stranger to the delightful emotions which fill your heart. I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could

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Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets from the Puritans to the Present (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 134.

give up all for Christ, were I called to die. Pray for me Dear A. that I may yet enter into the kingdom, that there may be room left for me in the shining courts above.²

The depth of her emotion is apparent here, as is the intensity of her desire for a conversion experience. Equally obvious, however, are her sense of personal estrangement, her allegiance to the physical world, and her fear that she will never attain salvation. The fact that Dickinson spent such formative years in a revival atmosphere and was able to experience only a growing sense of isolation is a major clue to an understanding of her spiritual and poetic development and of her increasing self-reliance. The first section of this text will examine Dickinson's reactions to her religious environment, and will trace the development of her thought through an analytical discussion of several poems.

Emily Dickinson's most prolific creative years occurred in the early 1860's, in the middle of her life. By this time certain patterns had been established in her existence and certain experiences could be identified as crucial. For whatever reason, her celebrated withdrawal from the world had begun, a number of close friends had died, and she had experienced some emotional crisis which may or may not have involved the Reverend Charles Wadsworth.³ The effect of all the experiences was to convert a questioning mind to a truly skeptical one. The very fact that Dickinson was so poetically active in these important

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Emily Dickinson, Letters, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (3 vols., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 1, pp. 37-8.

3

For a biographical analysis of this event in Dickinson's life, see Richard Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson (2 vols., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 2, pp. 444-62.

years is an indication that she was involved in some inner quest that could not find expression in any other way. Glauco Cambon notes that Dickinson's poetic practice is really a search for knowledge.

For Emily Dickinson, poetry as such is experiment and knowledge . . . the results are never predictable; at the limit, we can posit an equation of experiment-peril-experience . . . The inflexible urge to know thus brings her to question everything -- life and death, God and world and self -- until the instruments of analytic knowledge renege, and then she knows only by "unknowing."⁴

This skeptical turn of mind is apparent in any number of poems from this period, several of which will be discussed in detail later in this study. Skepticism is an attempt to deal with incomprehensible experience, with all of her "flood subjects;" it is a question that inevitably precludes a response. The habit of skepticism was useful to Dickinson in establishing personal and poetic distance from intense experience, and will be examined as such an aesthetic tool in the second section of this text.

It would be a mistake to assume that the final years of Emily Dickinson's life were a tidy synthesis of her earlier experiences, or that she definitely achieved the unity that had eluded her for so long. However, it is possible to discern further developments in her thought that tend toward a kind of self-knowledge that was previously lacking. It is as if she discovered that her earlier instincts toward isolation and self-reliance were correct, and that all of her experience had led her full circle to confront, finally, herself. As Cambon points out, this transcendence of the self is more mental than spiritual:

⁴
Glauco Cambon, "Emily Dickinson and the Crisis of Self-Reliance," Transcendentalism and its Legacy, ed. Myron Simon and Thornton H. Parsons (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 129.

Emily Dickinson's very private kind of paradise regained is accessible (if intermittently) to the "Costumeless Consciousness" of poem number 1454, the mind that has died to itself, discarded its superstructures, and faced its naked terrors.⁵

This final stage of her life subsumes the earlier primarily spiritual and artistic phases; it represents a kind of synthesis, although not perhaps the unity she would have first desired. If we can say that the self triumphs for Emily Dickinson, we must also say that the intellect triumphs, and that the life of the mind predominates over the life of the heart and of the spirit. The transcendence that she achieved was finally the result of her intellect as developed by her spiritual and poetic natures; the final section of this text will be devoted to an examination of this transcendence as its development is shown through her mind and art.

I have chosen three subjects of particular poetic interest to Dickinson -- God, death, and privation. An examination of her changing artistic treatment of these themes will illustrate the more general changes that occurred in her thought. Each section of the text will consider one poem from each of these areas; a comparison of these common themes will show clear changes in tone and meaning.

It is of course impossible to divide an individual life into precise segments and dissect private experience with any sure degree of accuracy. It is the goal of this study to show definite developments in Emily Dickinson's thought as they are given evidence in her poems and letters, and as they have illuminated by the work of her critics. These stages of development must necessarily be described separately,

for the sake of clarity; however, it is not my intention to suggest that these stages occurred independently of each other, but rather that their interaction provided the significant creative impulse that produced Dickinson's poetry. The developing consciousness found its impetus in religion, its voice in poetry, and its home in the mind; in the end Dickinson came to embody the synthesis she had sought to achieve through external means.

CHAPTER II

THE KNOWLEDGE OF SEPARATION

Certainly one of the most important shaping influences in Emily Dickinson's early life was the religious atmosphere of nineteenth century New England. As noted above, the town of Amherst was particularly rigorous in its approach to spiritual matters; religious revivals and individual conversions were the rule and not the exception. It is not surprising that Dickinson should regard such relentless proselytizing first with bewilderment and later with increasing annoyance. She was such an intensely private person that the notion that the state of her soul could be of general interest to her fellow townspeople must have been abhorrent to her. Also, there is reason to believe that Dickinson was skeptical that a conversion experience that occurred in the emotional fervor of revival could be genuine; certainly she came to doubt the validity of her own brief experience:

. . . Last winter there was a revival here. The meetings were thronged by people old and young . . . Perhaps you will not believe it Dear A. but I attended none of the meetings last winter. I felt that I was so easily excited that I might again be deceived and I dared not trust myself . . . ¹

In any case, it is safe to say that religion played an important role in determining the shape of her life, character, and art, and that her views of God and men were to a large degree colored by her religious heritage.

Nineteenth century New England was not far removed from the

¹
Dickinson, Letters, 1, pp. 27-8.

seventeenth century Puritans. The notion of God's relationship to men was still remarkably the same, Transcendentalism notwithstanding:

The Puritan God is entirely incomprehensible to man . . . to Puritanism itself, the idea was fundamental that God, the force, the power, the life of the universe, must remain to man hidden, unknowable, and unpredictable. He is the ultimate secret, the awful mystery.²

Clearly God and man were entirely separate, at least to the limits of man's knowledge; man should be prepared to make a "leap of faith" in order to have a relationship with God at all. Man could not comprehend the actions or the motivations of God; indeed, he should not even want to comprehend them. Man's role in the universe was almost parasitic in the Puritan world view, and his only salvation lay in occasional (and ephemeral) moments of spiritual vision:

It is only too clear that man is not at home within this universe, and yet that he is not good enough to deserve a better; he is out of touch with the grand harmony, he is an incongruous being amid the creatures, a blemish and a blot on the face of nature . . . There are moments of vision when the living spirit seems to circulate in his veins, when man is in accord with the totality of things, when his life ceases to be a burden to him, and separateness is ecstatically overcome by mysterious participation in the whole . . .³

The most important concepts in this world view in its relationship to Dickinson's work and thought are the notions that man's life is usually a burden and that separation is his normal state. The implication is that he is separate from both God and men, that isolation is complete except for fleeting apprehensions of grace. Dickinson's heritage and religious instruction endowed her with an early knowledge of this

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Perry Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 10.

³

Miller, p. 7.

separation; its effect on her life and work was profound.

The most convincing proof of the impact of religion on Dickinson's life lies in her letters to her friend Abiah Root. The correspondence was largely given over to discussions of religion, and it reveals a great deal about Dickinson's response to the general spiritual concerns that flourished all around her; the letters certainly prove that she was far from indifferent to the question of religion in these early years.

. . . Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity . . . I don't know why it is but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth . . . I feel that . . . I ought now to make my peace with my maker . . . Although I am not a christian still I feel deeply the importance of attending to the subject before it is too late.⁴

Obviously the subject of salvation was one to which Dickinson gave much thought; we are accustomed to considering her as a poet withdrawn from society, and it is perhaps surprising to realize that she felt such strong ties to this world that she was unable to commit herself to life in the next:

. . . I think of the perfect happiness I experienced while I felt I was an heir of heaven . . . But the world allured me & in an unguarded moment I listened to her syren voice. From that moment I seemed to lose my interest in heavenly things by degrees . . .⁵

One of the most telling letters in this series was written during Dickinson's year at Mount Holyoke Sminary. As noted above, a school-wide revival took place that year, with the girls being called upon in assemblies to profess faith in Christ; Dickinson was one of the few (perhaps the only) student who felt unable to make such a profession

⁴ Dickinson, Letters, 1, p. 28.

⁵ Dickinson, Letters, 1, pp. 30-1.

honestly, and this failure represented a profound crisis in her life.⁶

. . . I tremble when I think how soon the weeks and days of this term will all have been spent, and my fate will be sealed, perhaps. I have neglected the one thing needful when all were obtaining it, and I may never, never again pass through such a season as was granted us last winter . . . I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world. I had quite a long talk with Abby . . . and she says she only desires to be good. How I wish I could say that with sincerity, but I fear I never can . . .⁷

The serious tone of these letters is immediately apparent, as is their extreme honesty. Dickinson was keenly aware of her separation from God, and, as she continued to remain outside the circle of her acquaintances in matters of salvation, she began to feel isolated from man as well. The honesty that made her unable to conform to the established religious patterns of her society contributed greatly to her poetic vision, and the isolation that she felt as a young girl was eventually made fruitful in her later intellectual development.

The early letters of Emily Dickinson are helpful in establishing her moods and concerns during an important formative stage. However, it is in her early poems that we may begin to discern the application of these early experiences. Religion was always a rich source of poetic inspiration for Dickinson; poems on God, death, and salvation (or the lack thereof) abound during virtually every phase of her artistic career. In the early poems, however, she was testing her craft as well as her

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For an account of Dickinson's experiences at Mount Holyoke Seminary, see George Frisbie Whicher, This Was a Poet (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), pp. 58-76.

7

Dickinson, Letters, 1, pp. 67-8.

faith, as she attempted to resolve many of the same problems that plagued her as a school-girl. Poetry allowed her the freedom of unorthodox response to orthodox questions; her images are often highly colored by her Calvinist heritage, yet they are also given new shapes by her own questioning mind. The themes of her poetry remained fairly constant throughout her career; it is in the changing treatment of those themes that we can see signs of the developing intellect.

As noted above, the subject of God was an all-important one to seventeenth century Puritans; from the volume of her poems on the subject, we may assume that it was no less important to Dickinson. She approached God in many ways - as a little girl, as a bride, as a skeptic -- and He in turn assumed many guises in her poetic imagination. One of her earliest poems can be read as a half-frightened, half-familiar childish burlesque of the Lord's Prayer:

Papa above!
 Regard a Mouse
 O'erpowered by the Cat!
 Reserve within thy kingdom
 A "Mansion" for the Rat!

Snug in seraphic Cupboards
 To nibble all the day,
 While unsuspecting Cycles
 Wheel solemnly away!⁸

There are several elements in this poem that later become characteristic. First, and most obvious, the "Father in Heaven" has become "Papa above." This style of address would be impossible for an orthodox Calvinist to use; Dickinson is able to use it because her flexible poetic imagination can form new images out of old material and because, even in her

irreverence, she is anxious to appear child-like and innocent. Second, there is the notion that the speaker is threatened by some outside force, a "cat" toying with a humble "mouse." Characteristically, these are extremely domestic images; equally characteristic is the notion that the speaker is in need of protection. The last two lines of the first stanza are a direct Biblical reference -- "In my Father's house are many Mansions" (John 14:2); that one of the mansions might be reserved for a rat is a self-deprecatory, ironic touch. The final stanza appears to add more homely detail, but closer examination reveals even stronger irony; there is a strong suggestion that the "mansions" may turn out to be cupboards, and that the Eucharist may be only cheese. This stanza also introduces a word that becomes increasingly important in Dickinson's poetic vocabulary; that word is "Cycles," and its context here is particularly interesting in light of her later view of herself in relation to the universe. Circle and circular motions were always vitally interesting to Dickinson (she said, "My business is circumference"); yet in this poem she seems totally removed from the cycles of the universe which do not even suspect her presence. Her separation from God is obvious here; though he is addressed familiarly as "Papa," the speaker is not even human. What is not so obvious, but is surely as important, is her feeling of isolation from the rest of the world.

In his study of Dickinson's early poetry, David Porter makes these comments on this poem:

She employs within her homely metaphor not only the familiar but the playfully absurd . . . On this occasion, she is detached

sufficiently⁹ from her controlling theme to use the opportunity for comedy.

Porter is right to point out the comedic effects that serve to establish a useful distance between the poet and her subject. It seems to me, however, that the poem's total effect is not playful; its underlying absurdity is dark, almost macabre, in the first stanza; the mouse becomes a rat, and the speaker addressing God as father is definitely not human. The second stanza could be lighter, with its continuing attention to domestic detail; again, however, there is a nightmarish quality attached to the endlessly wheeling cycles of the universe, and more than a little sarcasm in the description of Paradise. The tone of this poem is deceptively humorous; there is a desperation underlying its simple lines that seems to spring from Dickinson's lack of faith in both God and herself.

The second important theme in Dickinson's poetry is often closely related to her view of God; her treatment of the subject of death revealed God in the role of thief. If God was the ultimate mystery for the Puritans and for Dickinson, surely death was a close second; in the early poems, death represents the ultimate loss and is closely associated with poverty.

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels - twice descending
Reimbursed my store -

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David T. Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry
(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 91.

Burglar! Banker - Father!
I am poor once more!¹⁰

The deaths of several friends affected Dickinson deeply in these years; I refer particularly to the deaths of Leonard Humphrey and Benjamin Newton, young men who were friends of the entire Dickinson family and who were particularly close to Dickinson herself.¹¹ She came early to associate death with robbery, and, in what is perhaps a natural progression of thought, to cast God in the role of robber. Several letters from this period make reference to this idea.

. . . If God should choose, Jennie, he could take my Father, too and my dear Vinnie, and put them in his sky, to live with him forever . . . I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love . . .¹²

A later letter is even more bitter:

. . . I can't stay any longer in a world of death. Austin is ill of fever. I buried my garden last week - our man, Dick, lost a little girl through the scarlet fever. I thought perhaps that you were dead, and not knowing the sexton's address, interrogate the daisies. Ah! dainty - dainty Death! Ah! democratic Death! Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden, - then deep to his bosom calling the serf's child!

Say, is he everywhere? Where shall I hide my things? Who is alive? The woods are dead . . .¹³

In any case, it is clear that death is closely associated with theft and separation, and in this poem she finds impersonal business terms useful in describing her emotions. In the first stanza she sees herself as a

¹⁰ Dickinson, Complete Poems, p. 27.

¹¹ Virtually all biographies examine the importance of Dickinson's relationships with Humphrey and Newton. The Sewall and Whicher biographies, cited above, are particularly helpful.

¹² Dickinson, Letters, 1, p. 197.

¹³ Dickinson, Letters, 1, p. 341.

beggar beseeching God for favor; this tone is reminiscent of that of "Papa above." Her request is granted and her coffers are replenished, only to be robbed again in the same manner; there is a real suggestion of cruelty here, as if God and death were in league against her. Her sense of isolation is heightened by the fact that her actions are ineffective; the real action of the poem goes on around her.

Porter makes the following comments about the emotional range of the poem:

"I never lost as much but twice" stands among those poems which convey an emotional intensity seemingly out of all proportion to the magnitude of the statement. Its success is in the stark rendering of the gamut of emotional responses to bereavement. The feelings compounded are those of grief, of bitterness, of indecision, and resignation. This range is effectively expressed through the metaphors of crime and commerce, each of which gives way abruptly to the final humility implied in the paternal address.¹⁴

Again, I can agree with Porter only partially. Certainly the emotional diversity expressed in the poem is remarkable; however, I see no humility expressed in the final address "Father!" On the contrary, the word seems full of bitterness and reproach. The series of words "Burglar! Banker - Father!" represents a kind of series of discovery as the poet comes to identify the criminal at last. This poem is particularly interesting because of the close identification it makes between God and death and because it effectively leaves the poet separate from both.

The final "flood subject" of real significance in these early poems is that of privation, or the lack of salvation. As we have seen, the failure to experience a religious conversion was of real concern to Dickinson; she saw herself as a total failure in the one area in

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Porter, pp. 163-4.

which she desperately wanted to succeed. This concept of privation came to represent a kind of poetic economy for her, a necessary means of establishing distance between herself and her emotional themes:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated - dying -
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!¹⁵

There are obvious references in this poem to the symbols of salvation -- for example, the bread and wine of the communion service (the "nectar" and the "Host"). The implication is clear that salvation means more to those who have been denied its achievement -- i.e., the poet herself. It would also seem that, while her need is most acute, she will never attain the "forbidden" goal, but will continue in the atmosphere of privation.

This poem clearly illustrates the world of opposites in which Dickinson moved, a world where hunger could not be eased by food, nor thirst by water; this world of opposites enabled her to maintain a crucial distance between her own experience and her poet subjects. Privation was a means of keeping herself poised always on the edge of experience; paradoxically it opened up worlds of sensation she never had to know first hand. Inder Nath Kher points out the importance of

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Dickinson, Complete Poems, p. 35.

opposites in Dickinson's poetry in a discussion of this poem:

In her poetic world, the agreeable and harsh edges of existence intermingle freely: to her life is the most profound revelation of harmonious dissonance, rich poverty, comforting danger, joyous grief, luminous darkness, and peaceful tempest. She measures victory by defeat . . . ¹⁶

Dickinson is able to reconcile these opposites by never fully experiencing any of them; she remains balanced, encompassing all emotions and negating all experience. The distance that she establishes in this poem is primarily a distance between herself and others; she is the isolated one, the failure among all the successes. But, more importantly, she serves herself and her art, through the distance that she establishes between herself and external experience. She manages to turn this privation into a poetic asset; her very lack of direct religious experience becomes a shaping force in her art.

In the essay "Sumptuous Destitution," Richard Wilbur notes that for Dickinson, less is often more, that failure may be preferable to success:

. . . I refer to her repeated assertion of the paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty; that to renounce is to possess the more . . . In her inner life, as well, she came to keep the world's images, even the images of things passionately desired, at the remove that renunciation makes; and her poetry at its most mature continually proclaims that to lose or forego what we desire is somehow to gain . . . ¹⁷

The point that Wilbur makes here is aptly suited to the poem under discussion. There is something more attractive, more desirable about the

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Inder Nath Kher, The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson's Poetry (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 21.

¹⁷

Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 130.

defeated one in the poem; at least he (or she) fully understands what has been won by others. The philosophy of privation was perhaps not consciously chosen by Dickinson, but it certainly evolved as a useful tool in establishing aesthetic distance in her work and emotional distance in her life.

Emily Dickinson became aware of her isolation at a remarkably early age; given her environment, her knowledge of separation included both God and man. She was able to harness the energy of this knowledge into poetry; the distance was established, and her craft was put to use to make it work for her. God, death, and privation were three subjects she could never fully understand; her poetry shows the development of her consciousness as she attempts to deal with them, sharpening her focus until the distance dissolves into final clarity.

CHAPTER III

THE HABIT OF SKEPTICISM

The early 1860's were the most fruitful poetic years of Emily Dickinson's life; literally hundreds of poems have been dated from that period, including many that must be included among her finest efforts. It is therefore not surprising to reflect that those years also represented a time of great emotional upheaval for her and that Dickinson was able to turn the sense of separation she had experienced earlier into a creative asset. A serious poet always runs the risk of indulging in sentimentality; Dickinson chose to combat that danger by adopting an essentially skeptical attitude in her attempts to deal with the emotional forces of her life and art.

There has been an abundance of biographical speculation regarding the reasons for this concentrated period of creative activity. Besides our knowledge of the deaths of some of her close friends, there is the evidence of the much-publicized "Master" letters to show that she experienced an emotional crisis of an even more personal nature during this time. These letters were written to an unknown recipient; there is no clear proof that the letters were even sent. The "Master" has been variously identified, most commonly as the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, a minister for whom Dickinson entertained great regard; at least one study argues that Samuel Bowles, a well-known editor and friend of the Dickinson family, may have been the intended recipient.¹ In any

¹ See David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson: The Poet and Her Prose (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1967).

case, the letters give clear indications that an emotional upheaval was brewing; their passionate intensity is in at least one case expressed in terms that are violent, though metaphorical:

If you saw a bullet hit a Bird - and he told you he wasn't shot - you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word.

One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy's bosom - then would you believe? Thomas' faith in anatomy was stronger than his faith in faith . . . ²

The desire for love, or for belief in her love, appears to be as intense as her earlier desire for religious conversion; her use of the word "faith" associates it strongly with love. While it would be interesting and revealing to know the identity of Dickinson's "Master," that knowledge is not essential to an understanding of the ways in which she utilized her emotional experiences in her poetic material. If her "Master" represented a great love in her life, it was surely a love that she knew would never be fulfilled; both of the men posited as the objects of her affection were married and eminently respectable. Her failure to achieve a satisfactory emotional experience was perhaps similar to her failure to achieve a religious conversion; certainly both "privations" were the source of much fine poetry. The point has been made above that Dickinson used her sense of separation as a poetic tool to achieve the appropriate distance from her subjects; it seems to me that she honed that tool into skepticism as a means of shaping ungovernable emotion into finely crafted poetry.

However unhappy her emotional life may have been during this unsettled period, it is certain that neither the quantity nor quality of

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Dickinson, Letters, 2, p. 373.

her poetry suffered. Yet her artistic career was another source of frustration to her at least partially because of the advice given by the man she chose for her literary mentor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. A prominent critic, Higginson probably had the best of intentions when he counseled Dickinson on her poetry, but the simple fact remains that he never understood her; he did everything he could to change her into a conventional poet, writing conventional, perfectly rhyming verse. Fortunately she politely disregarded all of his advice, even though she maintained an essentially futile literary correspondence with him for years. Her first letter to him is almost childishly innocent as she asks his opinion of her art:

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?
 The Mind is so near itself - it cannot see, distinctly - and
 I have none to ask -
 Should you think it breathed - and had you the leisure to
 tell me, I should feel quick gratitude -
 If I make the mistake - that you dared to tell me - would give
 me sincerer honor - toward you -
 I enclose my name ³ asking you, if you please - Sir - to tell
 me what is true . . .

In her third letter there is already evidence that she knows she must disregard his advice:

. . . Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, swung -
 I had not supposed it. Your first - gave no dishonor, because
 the True - are not ashamed - I thanked you for your justice - ⁴ but
 could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my tramp . . .

In her fifth letter, she specifically acknowledges his failure to understand her; despite her tone of polite surprise at his shortcomings, the implication is clear that the failure is a common one:

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 Dickinson, Letters, 2, p. 403.

⁴
 Dickinson, Letters, 2, p. 408.

. . . You say "Beyond your knowledge." You would not jest with me, because I believed you - but Preceptor - you cannot mean it? All men say "What" to me, but I thought it a fashion . . .⁵

The failure of this second important relationship must have been a bitter disappointment to Dickinson; if she did not expect instant acclamation from Higginson, she must surely have expected comprehension. Her poetry was little known during her lifetime; only seven poems were published, all badly edited, and even her family did not guess at the volume of her work. Her correspondence with Higginson was her only real contact with the literary world, and his tacit discouragement of her work represented another failure in communication, re-emphasizing her isolation. The shape that she was able to give to her life through art was unacceptable to all extant conventions; this period of frustration was marked by her social and religious withdrawal as well as by her increased literary activity. The distance between Dickinson and the rest of the world increased in direct proportion to the decrease of her faith in its ability to understand or help her.

The changes in Dickinson's attitude toward God that occurred as a result of these experiences were subtle, and, as befits a maturing artist, they are chiefly apparent in changes in her approach to her material. The following poem, dated 1862, shows their affect on her developing mind and art:

God is a distant - stately Lover -
 Woods, as He states us - by His Son -
 Verily, a Vicarious Courtship -
 "Miles", and "Priscilla", were such an One -

But, lest the Soul - like fair "Priscilla"
 Choose the Envoy - and spurn the Groom -

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Dickinson, Letters, 2, p. 415.

Vouches, with hyperbolic archness -
 "Miles", and "John Alden" were Synonym - 6

In comparing this poem with "Papa above," we immediately note its greater sophistication. In the first poem, familiarity is achieved through the use of child-like language; paradoxically, this also creates an effect of distance since it creates a hierarchy within the poem. In this poem, however, the language is that of an elaborate joke, and though the joke may be on "us" in the end, there is definite mockery in Dickinson's attitude toward God's deceptive actions. In this poem, too, though God chooses to be distant, even greater distance is imposed by Dickinson's sarcastic treatment of her subject. The sense of artistic control is much greater here than in the earlier poem since Dickinson herself seems to be in control of our impression; the levels of meaning may not be as rich in this later poem, but nothing is left to chance in its intention.

Inder Nath Kher uses this poem as an example of Dickinson's treatment of the kinds of love that exist between God and man:

The spiritual eroticism or the Eros embodied in Dickinson's poetry forms the basis of her awareness of the God-man relationship. Her poetry dramatizes all the possibilities of love and suffering which are fundamental to this relationship . . . Even God, whom Dickinson portrays as a "distant - stately Lover," loves us "as He states us ⁷ by His Son," who is a paradigm of suffering and sacrifice . . .

While it is true that this poem does deal with a facet of God's love for man, it seems to me that Kher errs in emphasizing the importance of Christ as a symbol of suffering. Christ's role merely heightens the actual and metaphorical distance that exists between God and man; far

⁶ Dickinson, Complete Poems, pp. 169-70.

⁷ Kher, p. 166.

from being a symbol of a loving Father, He is used to show a petty, jealous God who fears even the possible influence of His own Son. Dickinson's treatment of God in this important phase of her career reveals a marked change in her concept of their relationship. Perhaps because of her lessening faith, she seems to possess a far greater degree of self-control, as well as a greater command of her material. There is no supplicatory tone in this poem as there was in "Papa above;" indeed, God is seeking favors from us. In these cool tones, the first indications of Dickinson's eventual self-reliance begin to be apparent.

In a poem written in the same year, Dickinson again draws a close association between God and death. Unlike the action of "I never lost as much but twice," the speaker's own death is the subject under consideration. Despite this active participation, the tone of this poem is less personal than that of the earlier one, perhaps because it lacks a sense of surprise at bitter betrayal:

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

The very fact that the setting of this poem is a deathbed suggests a new perspective on death itself; here it is an expected visitor, and not a prowling thief. The only unexpected, dissonant note is the intrusion of a fly and Dickinson's close association of God and death gives richness to the various levels of meaning suggested by that insect. Whether the "King" is God, or death, or both, He is surely reduced in stature by the ignominious coupling of his name with that of a common pest; if the fly is not meant to be associated with these powerful figures, then the "King" has simply not appeared. In either case, Dickinson manages to considerably reduce the grandeur of her formidable subjects, and to create an atmosphere that is strongly suggestive of her own doubts about the orthodox Calvinistic approach to death. The situation posited in this poem is normal enough; shown are the deathbed, the waiting relatives, even the willing of the "Keepsakes." However, Dickinson's skepticism enables her to challenge the final certainty that would make the scene complete, and that is the significance of death itself. The presence of the fly, and the fact that it is the eventual cause of darkness, suggests that perhaps death has no meaning, that the "King" will not appear, or even that there is no "King" at all. In "I never lost as much but twice," God and death commit robbery against the poet's store; in this later poem, Dickinson herself robs her antagonists of their significance by her skeptical shaping of what might have been a religious vision.

Dickinson's attitude toward privation during this period represents the progression we might expect from our examination of the other poems. Salvation itself is somewhat diminished in importance in her eyes; her

sense of separation from other people in her attitude toward religion seems greater, but it also seems more desirable:

I had been hungry, all the years -
My Noon had Come - to dine -
I trembling drew the Table near -
And touched the Curious Wine -

'Twas this on Tables I had seen -
When turning, hungry, Home
I looked in Windows, for the Wealth
I could not hope - for Mine -

I did not know the ample Bread -
'Twas so unlike the crumb
The Birds and I, had often shared
In Nature's - Dining Room -

The Plenty hurt me - 'twas so new -
Myself felt ill - and odd -
As Berry - of a Mountain Bush -
Transplanted - to the Road -

Nor was I hungry - so I found
That Hunger - was a way
Of Persons outside Windows -
The Entering - takes away - 9

In many ways, this poem is similar to the earlier "Success is counted sweetest;" the elements of the sacrament are present in both, as is the implication that the attainment of success somehow lessens its richness. What makes this poem interesting -- indeed, what represents a progression of thought for the poet -- is the fact that Dickinson herself defines the limits of the separation. It is at last her turn to taste salvation, and she finds it unpalatable; she sees her isolation, her personal communion in "Nature's - Dining Room" as preferable to the satiation of the conversion experience. Again, the poem is conventional; it is an orthodox Communion scene. But the protagonist defies convention in her

adverse reaction to the sacred ritual, and the potentially transcendent experience becomes repellent. The speaker in this poem makes a conscious choice to reject that experience, and it seems clear that only Dickinson's growing skepticism could have enabled her to even imagine such a choice. The distance that exists as a result of her lack of faith could conceivably have been overcome by her Communion; here, however, that lack of faith seems infinitely preferable to the heavy reality of the state of grace.

One function of art is to impose order upon chaos; poetry served this purpose for Emily Dickinson in this crucial period as she sought to deal with a variety of cataclysmic experiences. Her development of skepticism as a poetic tool seems almost inevitable when we consider her earlier doubts about religion. Since it involves rigorous questioning, skepticism is a means toward self-knowledge and self-definition. As such, it represents a definite stage of development in Dickinson's thought as it is reflected in her art. William Sherwood makes the point that a questioning attitude implies intellectual progress:

. . . the very act of questioning arises from a vision of alternatives and hence leads to an obligation to perceive, discriminate, define, and choose . . . The mind's weapon against the paralysis of despair is its capacity to define and subordinate despair to the form the mind imposes upon it . . . the imposition of order is itself a purposeful and salutary act.¹⁰

Thus for Dickinson the act of creation represented a vital step in her intellectual development. The emotional shocks that she endured during these years could have proved paralytic; instead they provided

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William R. Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), pp. 113-4.

her with an energy that found its outlet in the re-shaping of those experiences, into verse. She had already discovered and reconciled herself to a sense of separation; skepticism enabled her to set her own personal and artistic limits on that distance, and to achieve a greater degree of self-reliance in her life and art.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE SELF

The final years of Emily Dickinson's life brought no sudden changes in the patterns that had long been established. Her "store" of family and friends was naturally depleted by death; the loss of her young nephew was a particularly bitter blow. She had a warm relationship with Judge Otis Lord; that involvement could have ended in marriage, but again, an emotional response was never brought to fruition.¹ The changes that are apparent in Dickinson's poetry of this period seem to have been wrought by internal rather than external developments in the poet's life. She remained in comparative isolation, maintained a remarkably voluminous correspondence, and created an impressive body of poetry. In short, the events of her life remained essentially the same; the final developments of her mind and art were the result of the intellectual progress that had its roots in her questioning nature. The early events of her life led her to the conviction that she was the only fit judge of her religion and her poetry; this tendency toward self-reliance evolved in her maturity into a transcendence of the self that was that final product of her years of personal and poetic isolation.

The last letters that Dickinson wrote are generally less helpful than the earlier ones in identifying the changes in attitude she had experienced; they tend to be rather cryptic, and deal principally with

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Volume 2 of the Sewall biography, cited above, deals fully with these events in Dickinson's life.

specific village events rather than matters of personal philosophy. This is further evidence of Dickinson's increasing self-reliance, since it indicates a growing unwillingness on her part to ask advice of others. Some of the letters are revealing since they at least show a shifting perspective on her "flood subjects." The first letter written to her sister-in-law after her nephew's death shows an acceptance of death that would have been impossible earlier:

The Vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled -
 How simply at the last the Fathom comes . . .
 No crescent was this Creature - He traveled
 from the Full -
 Such soar, but never set -
 I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity
 in everything that flies - His Life was like the Bugle,
 which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo - his Requiem
 ecstasy -
 Dawn and Meridian in one . . . 2

The death of this little boy was a blow from which Dickinson never fully recovered, yet this letter creates a vision of his brief life as a complete cycle. There is none of the outrage at death as a thief that we might legitimately expect. Indeed, the last letter that she wrote seems to reveal the same view of her own death; it reads simply "Called back,"³ and was written only days before her final illness. Again, there is a sense of the completion of a cycle, of the inevitable return to the beginning of life. If death has not lost its sting for Dickinson, it seems to have lost its power to diminish her; in this final letter, her desperation has given way to acceptance, and her increased control is reflected in her later poetry as well.

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Dickinson, Letters, 3, p. 799.

³

Dickinson, Letters, 3, p. 906.

Dickinson's later poetry does not change appreciably in its approach to God; it continues to deal with her sense of distance and separation from God. It does differ from the earlier work, however, in its view of this world as opposed to the next:

Of God we ask one favor,
That we may be forgiven -
For what, he is presumed to know -
The Crime, from us, is hidden -
Immured the whole of Life
Within a magic Prison
We reprimand the Happiness 4
That too competes with Heaven.

The tone of the first four lines of this poem is similar to that of "God is a distant - stately Lover" in its mocking disparagement of God's actions. In the earlier poem though, there is very little possibility for action on the part of man; we are only able to react to God. This later poem gives much more responsibility to man, since it points out a definite flaw in those reactions. The "magic Prison" is at least partially of our own making since it represents our unquestioning belief in our "Crime" and our refusal to accept the pleasures that are readily available to us. This increased awareness of individual responsibility is further evidence of Dickinson's growing vision of the self, and the mature intellectual apprehension of the place of the self within the universe.

Dickinson's escapes from her own "magic Prison" were made possible by the creation of her art; her poetry, kept as private as possible, was her surest form of self-assertion. In his discussion of this poem, Charles R. Anderson states that her work represented the only kind of

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Dickinson, Complete Poems, p. 662.

religious vision she was ever to have, akin to the "leap of faith" that was the salvation of the seventeenth century Puritan.

. . . Her pained sense of estrangement from the religion of her fathers lingered to the end, but so did the integrity that gave her the courage to go her own way, to continue her search for heaven through poetry rather than through a theology she could not accept . . . She dedicated herself to creating the one thing of absolute value that, in her view, the human being is capable of. It goes under the rather inadequate name of religion, or art, the vision that comes with man's utmost reach towards truth and beauty. Its essence is longing, with ecstasy at one end and pain at the other, the leap of the heart and the despair of the mind.⁵

Anderson rightly points out the closeness with which Dickinson came to associate religion and art; her growing confidence in herself as creator naturally caused changes in her view of her own value and responsibility. The transcendence of the "magic Prison" for her was eventually the transcendence of the self. The development that is evident in this poem involves her intellectual and artistic control over her material; it also involves a definite shift in perspective regarding the possibilities for human action in God's universe.

The attitude towards death that is apparent in these later poems also reveals a further change in perspective. It has been noted above that though death remained a very real enemy to Dickinson, (as well as an important source for poetry), it became less an object of blank terror than of skeptical regard. In a poem from this period, death's importance has been further diminished and its primary place in Dickinson's catalogue of loss has been usurped:

Death's Waylaying not the sharpest
Of the thefts of Time -
There Marauds a sorer Robber,

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Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: The Stairway of Surprise (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 222.

Silence - is his name -
 No Assault, nor any Menace
 Doth betoken him.
 But from Life's consummate Cluster
 He supplants the Balm.⁶

In the earlier poems, it would seem impossible that she could imagine a "sorer Robber" than death, or that the loss of words could be more painful than the loss of life. This poem indicates the extreme importance of her work to Dickinson; the thought of "Silence," or the absence of poetry, has become more terrible than what once represented the ultimate loss to her. In "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -" death is diminished first because of the pre-eminence of the speaker herself, and second because of the doubts that she casts upon its significance. In this later poem, it is diminished still further by the suggestion that a living state can be worse than death itself. It seems to me that death was no longer Dickinson's supreme source of terror because of her increased self-awareness. The worst thing that she could imagine was the loss of her voice, the inability to practice her art; since her poetry represented the surest form of self-assertion that she knew, its loss would indeed be more painful than physical death. Dickinson's poetic voice was the voice of the self, and, as such, it enabled her to impose her own order on existence. Louis L. Martz has remarked that in Dickinson's work, the desire for control is intense:

. . . In every mood and crisis the individual brain struggles to maintain its ultimate control, its unremitting, individual grip on the microscopic details of human existence.⁷

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Dickinson, Complete Poems, p. 565.

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Louis L. Martz, The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry/English and American (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 104.

In the later poems especially, that individual control is maintained through the exercise of the mature intellect on the emotions; even a subject as potentially overwhelming as death is brought under control by the consideration of a more intellectual loss. The increased importance that Dickinson placed on the self is reflected in the increased importance assigned to the place of poetry in her life.

Dickinson's treatment of the subject of privation reveals perhaps the greatest change in attitude and the most profound development of thought. It also involves an extreme awareness of individual responsibility:

Who goes to dine must take his Feast
Or find the Banquet mean -
The Table is not laid without
Till it is laid within.

For Pattern is the Mind bestowed
That imitating her
Our most ignoble Services
Exhibit worthier.

This poem clearly places the credit or blame for success or failure with the individual; it does not take into account any of the excuses or compensations for failure that were offered in the earlier poems. It also places greatly increased importance on the mind; implying that religious or personal salvation can only be achieved through internal activity. Dickinson's concept of the self had obviously undergone extensive changes when it was written, since it places such a high premium on self-knowledge as a means of fulfillment. Her emphasis in this poem, as it is in the other two poems discussed here, is on individual action and responsibility, and on the value of both intellectual and artistic

activity as the means to transcendence of the self in a personal kind of salvation.

In all of these poems, Dickinson places great value on the voice and creative activity of the artist. Her emphasis on the association between religion and art links her to a radical element in her Puritan background and to the Transcendentalists of her own day. Albert J. Gelpi traces the influence of the concept of individualism in both of these philosophies:

From the beginning there had been in Protestantism the impulse to push the notion of private conscience to its final extreme -- namely, unquestioned reliance on individual revelation. In America there had been the related heresies of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams and the Friends, and there had been Cotton Mather's concept of "a particular faith" . . . However, while the conservative "Arminians" had successfully stamped out the fires that spread from Edwards' Northhampton, their Unitarian grandchildren pitted themselves in a losing effort against the hot-heads from Concord. Indeed, the momentum of the rebellious young Turks succeeded in . . . establishing the primacy of personal, innate, and now "secular" vision . . . The final step in the transition was the recognition of the poet as priest and saint . . . and the recognition of the creative imagination as man's divine faculty.⁹

Dickinson cannot be placed wholly in any philosophical camp, probably because of her deliberate isolation and her own particular brand of "self-reliance." However, the notion of individual revelation was surely not foreign to her; nor was the concept of divine art far from her own close identification of religious and creative experience. Her developing sense of self and her increasing awareness of herself as an artist naturally led her to a belief in creation as a transcendent experience. The interaction of her maturing emotional, creative, and intellectual

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Albert J. Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 59.

facilities enabled her to perceive this transcendence, and her developing self-awareness enabled her to achieve it. If it was a substitution for the religious conversion that she never knew, it was at least a transcendence that she could not question, since it was the result of her own unremitting effort.

It is not easy to draw conclusions about Dickinson's attitude towards faith in her later years. Certainly for her, the emphasis on faith necessarily shifted from an external to an internal focus, as she concentrated her faith in herself and her work and withdrew it from the outside world. Hyatt H. Waggoner states that, in the final poems, Dickinson views faith as a necessary condition of existence.

Among the poems dated by Johnson in the years from 1879 on until her death in 1886, not one of them returns to the question of whether any sort of religious faith is possible for one both informed and honest with himself . . . Dickinson came to believe that far from being required by anything we could "know" about a reality outside ourself, faith was simply a "first necessity" of our being, resting on nothing but need.¹⁰

Religious faith was always a comparatively moot point for Dickinson, since in matters of religion she was at best on shaky ground. The faith that eventually gave coherent shape to her life and work was faith in her own experience and in the value of her art. Her early failures in religious, emotional, and literary communication served to diminish her trust in the outside world and to increase her dependence on her own primary experience as a source for personal and poetic salvation. Her growing self-reliance was essentially a survival mechanism since it confirmed her in her belief that her own concerns and responses were valuable and trustworthy.

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Waggoner, pp. 205-6.

A short poem written near the end of her life illustrates her final belief in the self:

Lad of Athens, faithful be
To Thyself,
And Mystery -
All the rest is Perjury - 11

Dickinson certainly remained faithful to "Mystery;" from the beginning to the end of her life, she examined the unknowable and attempted to define the undefinable. Her developing consciousness came at last to the faith in self that was lacking in her early years. The quest that began for spiritual conversion carried her through creative skepticism to eventual self-awareness; her sense of separation never vanished, but her mature intellect was able to shape that distance into an appropriate vantage point for the clarification of her individual vision.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson left no essays describing her poetic practice, no criticism that would be helpful in defining her aesthetic creed; the only evidence that is available for examining her intellectual and artistic development is her primary material -- poems and personal correspondence. Through a chronological survey of these subjective materials, however, it is possible to discern definite patterns of development in both her treatment of her poetic themes and her more general thought. The phases of Dickinson's intellectual life can be roughly identified by examining the changing focuses of her most prominent personal and literary concerns; the conclusions that may be drawn from such an examination are helpful in revealing the acute consciousness of one who is too often categorized as a lyric poet.

Allen Tate has remarked about Emily Dickinson that ". . . it is the failure of the scholars to feel no more than biographical curiosity about her."¹ Perhaps it is a human characteristic to feel the sharpest curiosity about that which defies revelation; certainly Dickinson herself would understand the phenomenon. It seems to me that a general knowledge of such material as exists is sufficient for an understanding of her work; that is why I have included little of that information in this study. It is only through the mind of the

¹ Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson," in The Man of Letters in the Modern World (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1955), p. 212.

poet that we can come to such a critical understanding, and we can get at her mind only through her poems and letters. It is unlikely, for example, that we will ever be absolutely sure of the identity of Dickinson's "Master;" it is only vital to know that she experienced such an abortive love to be able to trace its influence in her poetry. The key to an understanding of Dickinson's intellectual development, and to an effective meshing of her biography and art, lies in an awareness of her concept of distance. All of the communicative experiences that have here been identified as failures -- religious, emotional, literary -- were the source of great pain and great poetry. Certainly it is not an untenable position to suggest that she chose pain, modified by intellectual scrutiny, as a poetic vehicle. This is not to suggest any psychological notion of mental masochism, but rather that Dickinson was able to successfully distance herself from potentially overwhelming experiences and produce poetry that captured the emotions of those experiences and not their literal facts.

I am suggesting, however, that Dickinson consciously used what Keats referred to in Shakespeare as "negative capability," or what T. S. Eliot called the "objective correlative;" that is, she experienced primary emotion and created in her poetry "a pattern of objects, actions, or events, which serve[d] to awaken in the reader the emotional response [she] desire[d] without being a direct statement of that emotion."² One fairly early poem that illustrates this point may refer to the death of a friend or to her failure to establish a relationship with

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C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1972), p. 361.

Wadsworth:

I held a Jewel in my fingers -
And went to sleep -
The day was warm, and winds were prosy -
I said "'Twill keep" -

I woke - and chid my honest fingers,
The Gem was gone -
And now, an Amethyst remembrance
Is all I own - ³

The key phrase is of course "Amethyst remembrance;" it carries the haunting weight of her loss, leaving just the barest suggestion of its physical presence. In this, as in so many poems, she creates a tentative, provocative image, removing herself from the actual experience and allowing the reader the privilege and responsibility of personal and critical understanding.

In his essay on Dickinson's poetry, Archibald MacLeish makes extensive and perceptive comments on its visual nature:

. . . Where can remembrance be amethyst? Where but in the eye . . . the "objects" of Emily's images are often not objects at all but abstractions used as though they were objects -- abstractions presented for the eye to see and the ear to hear and the hand to touch . . . the . . . characteristic image lets the light through either by pushing the natural object back until it seems to become an abstraction, or by drawing the abstraction forward until it has the look or feel of an object . . . ⁴

These teasing, semi-visual images are devices used by Dickinson to heighten the sense of distance or loss that shapes the content of much of her poetry. They serve to safeguard her from the opposing flaws of sentimentality and didacticism, since they lend a quality of detachment

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Dickinson, Complete Poems, p. 112.

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Archibald MacLeish, "The Private World: Poems of Emily Dickinson," Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 152-3.

to poems that could be overwhelmed by emotion. This necessary detachment was a product of Dickinson's growing artistic and intellectual maturity; her final development represented the fruition of her constant isolation and her artistic self-assurance.

The self-reliance that Dickinson eventually achieved was born of the unflinching honesty that would not allow her to participate in a religious revival when she felt no spiritual conversion. It was also a product of her ever-increasing faith in herself as her own surest critic, and of her essentially skeptical approach to her subject matter. In his essay entitled "Intellect," Emerson describes a basic human decision between mental qualities:

God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please, -- you can never have both. Between these, as a pendulum, man oscillates. He in whom the love of repose predominates will accept the first creed, the first philosophy, the first political party he meets, -- most likely his father's. He gets rest, commodity, and reputation; but he shuts the door of truth. He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations, between which, as walls, his being is swung . . . ⁵

The final lines might have been written about Emily Dickinson, for she maintained the critical distance from all certainties that made her into a mature artist and thinker. Her poetry represents a search for truth, a continuing quest for the answers to insoluble problems. David Porter points out that many critics have denied that her work shows evidence of any poetic development, and suggest that no coherent principle exists within the poems.⁶ This seems to me to be an oblique tribute to

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Intellect," in Essays (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1906), p. 189.

⁶ Porter, p. 18.

her inability to accept what she could not wholeheartedly believe, and to the intellectual flexibility that enabled her to perceive different answers to the same problems at different times in her life. The stages of her art vary in approach, not in theme; it is the failure of her critics not recognize the power of her developing intellect as it is evident in her struggle to resolve spiritual, emotional, and artistic problems in poetry. The interaction of these problems, coupled with the force of her natural skepticism, produced the atmosphere of creative tension for the development of her mind and art.

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